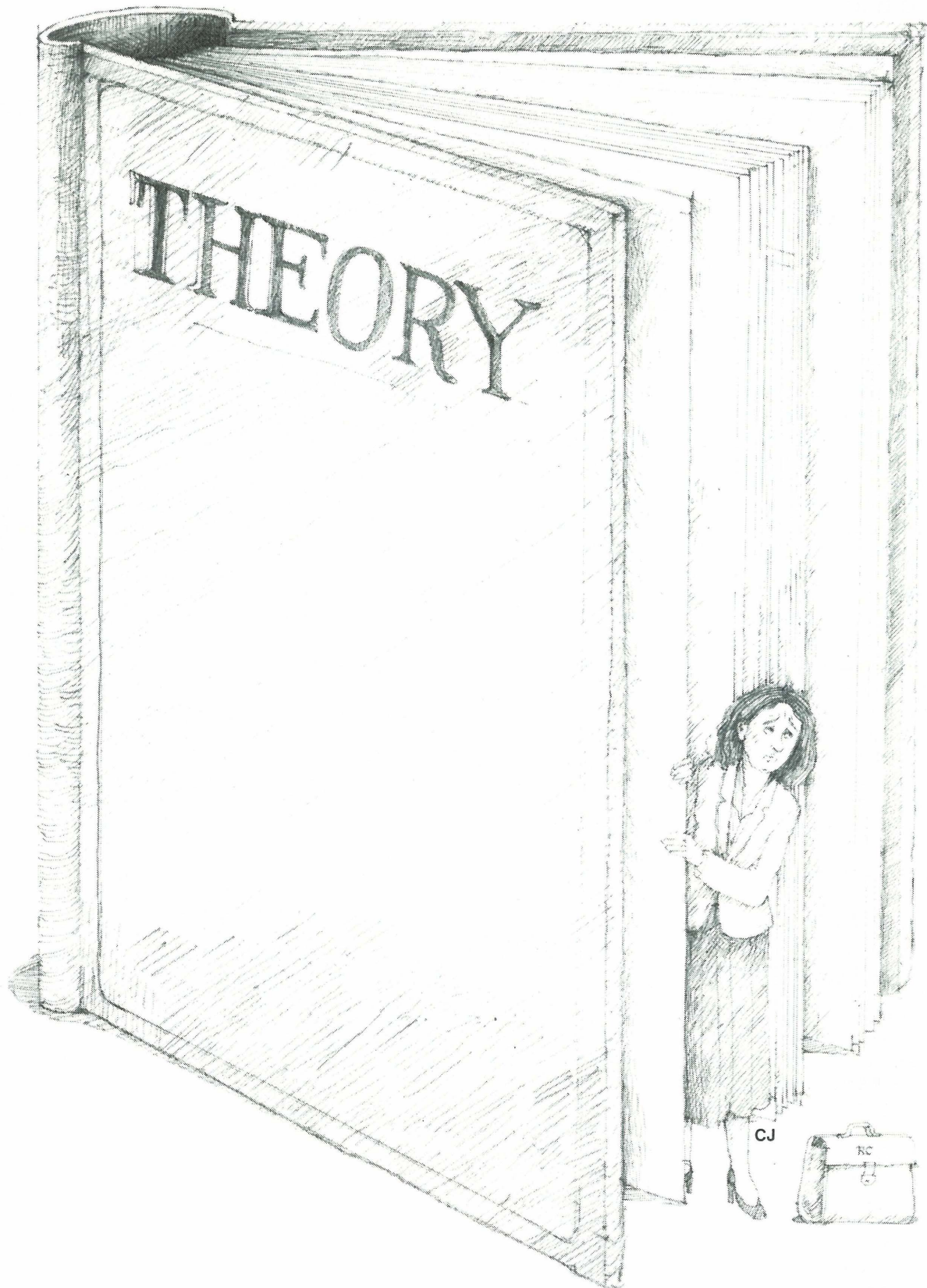


# Beginning Teachers: Modern Day Robinson Crusoes



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# Beginning Teachers: Modern Day Robinson Crusoes

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*Discipline is more a problem, though not recognised as such, to the beginning teacher . . .*

*A new teacher is more likely to have an idealistic conception of the student-teacher relationship than is an older teacher.*

These are comments from the noted Sociologist, Willard Waller, in 1932. After 50 years and nearly 500 research papers there seems to have been little change. Indeed, in recent literature one finds repeated reference to 'discipline' and 'classroom methods' problems, as well as to the 'idealism' of young neophyte teachers. Coupled with this are numerous emotive gems: beginning teachers are 'strangers in an unfamiliar environment never equipped with a sense of belonging'; all new teachers have 'formidable', 'painful', 'confusing' and 'frightening' experiences which 'panic' and 'terrify' them; while one author even refers to the 'undesirable gastric distress' which often besets young uninitiated teachers.

Is it true that **all** beginning teachers suffer such hardships, distresses and problems during their first year of teaching? To date, our surveys and questionnaires tend to suggest that our beginning teachers are like Robinson Crusoes, each alone on his island, struggling to survive with a few bits and pieces salvaged from the wreck.

## What We Need to Know

For research to be of any assistance we need to know exactly what are the everyday realities faced by teachers during their first year in the profession. So far, research has not been of much help.

There have been too many paper-and-pencil surveys, questionnaires and attitude inventories collecting thin 'slices of data' on the experiences of neophyte teachers, at the expense of longitudinal, observational and case study research. The research done so far has a sameness about it. While the findings are similar, and sometimes interesting, they fail to capture or even tap the complexities and dynamics of what it is like to be a first year teacher.

Of concern also, is the fact that policy making bodies and agencies who fund research, are more inclined to accept findings which are derived from these so-called 'scientific instruments' — such as paper-and-pencil questionnaires — than from observational investigations or case studies.

## A Case Study Approach

Ideally, research designed to tap the realities faced by first year teachers should be longitudinal in form so that changes in the group, and in individuals, can be monitored; it should allow the researcher to undertake regular observations and to become immersed in the group(s) being studied; and, it should enable the researcher to expand the scope of his inquiry via questionnaires and surveys if and when necessary.

A project in the Waikato in 1979 attempted this. It followed a group of 38 beginning primary teachers — nine of whom were university graduates — through their first year of teaching. Data was systematically collected not only from the 38 teachers, but also from their principals, senior teachers, colleagues and inspectors. This data was in the form of interviews, observations, documents and questionnaire responses, as well as diary accounts from each of the first year teachers. The researcher was a recent neophyte teacher himself and was in the same age group as most of his sample; he had no ascribed affiliation with the lecturing staff of a teachers' college or university, or with the Department of Education; and he spent most of his time in the schools.

The very human extracts from the Waikato research which follow should remind us that policies and statistics are about people, and should give depth to general discussion of beginning teachers' problems.

## Example 1: Children's Health

During the year most of the neophyte teachers encountered amongst their pupils the various types of common childhood illnesses and injuries (e.g. colds, measles, grazed knees). However, for a small group of teachers, the health of various children in their classes was constantly alluded to both in interviews and diary accounts. 33-F (Teacher 33, female) spoke about one of her pupils in the following terms:

*A revolting creature of a child — covered in sores and infection. He had all this white ointment up and down his legs. The headmaster brought him in and showed him to me. I told him to sit on the mat. After ten minutes, I was sitting on the mat, doing something, and I asked him where the ointment had gone. The kids said, "It's on the mat. It's on the mat. On the green mat" (laughs). That's exactly what I hate about them — scabby little things.*

(33-F: Feb)



Later, when referring to this child, she explained her unenviable position:

*They went into their groups and I was standing up the back there and the public health nurse came in. She was fed up with it because it was such a bad area for ear, noise and throat infections. Anyway, she said the whole family's under surveillance. She had his younger brother there and him, and she was going to get the rest of them. They checked them regularly and they're always infected. I said, "All year?"; and she said, "Yes, they just keep reinfecting each other". She can't do a thing about it.*

(33-F: Feb)

A similar situation existed in the school of 31-M and 34-F where these teachers were in regular contact with children like those described by their senior teacher:

*And this little girl in the green dress, well, she just pongs all day. While she was in the special class we could deal with her because they've got washing facilities down there. In the withdrawal class there's nothing. What we need is a hose (laughs) – a fire hose that we can hose the kids down with.*

(Senior Teacher: Jan)

For another three teachers, headlice was the main cause of worry. 32-F expressed a common reaction:

*I nearly died of shock the other day. The school nurse came round and said, "I believe one of your children has got nits?" Of, course, I've never come across nits before, and I thought, "Aagh!" (laughs). I found out three of them had them.*

(32-F: Feb)

The problem of headlice was more personal for 36-F:

*... we had an outbreak and six teachers in the unit got them ... It's a jolly nuisance.*

(36-F: Feb)

This nuisance was to become a financial burden, much to the displeasure of 36-F:

*When I got the nits I was given free stuff but you couldn't wash your hair for ten days so I had to go to the chemist to buy stuff that you could wash your hair with. Then I had to buy a nit comb and then you had to buy scarves to tie your hair up with. Apparently, we're not getting any compensation for the nit comb or shampoo. I think that's pretty tough and so far I'm out of pocket about forty dollars.*

(36-F: May)

## Example 2: Getting on with the Principal

12-F's principal commented most favourably about her in both openended questionnaire responses and in interviews. A common example was the following remark:

*12-F, of course, is quite a cracker-jack. She really is. She's good, dynamic, innovative – She cares about kids. She's concerned for them. She's rather unusual.*

(12-F-Principal: Oct)

What gave rise to these comments? What was 12-F's reaction to, and relationship with, her principal? For the first two weeks of the school year, 12-F had made little mention, other than brief passing references, of her principal. However, starting in February, and at various other times in the year, the principal visited her classroom.

Initially, these visits were to check classroom equipment:

*Last week, I think it was, the principal came in about five times in the one day, but it was for things like checking to see if I had a clock, then he'd come back for something else.*

(12-F: Feb)

Later, the principal came into 12-F's classroom specifically to observe her teaching. His ability to avoid attracting the attention of the teacher on such occasions impressed 12-F:

*On Friday he walked in here and actually I was blasting the kids and I never realised he'd come in (laughs). He just merges in and I never see him. He gets down to the kids' level physically and asks them what they're doing, and joins in. I just forget he's there which I find is really good and helpful. It's also helpful to the kids. I don't make a thing about him being in the room, so therefore they don't get worried.*

(12-F: March)

Incidents, such as this, fostered the development of the professional relationship between them to such an extent that, unlike a number of other teachers in the study, 12-F said she felt at ease when the principal visited her classroom:

*He shows he's human to the kids. You know, you chop them down for being naughty, and he tells them what he did when he was a child, which was twice as bad (laughs). He's done nothing short of rape and murder, which is good in one sense. He's a great principal.*

(12-F: Nov)

## Example 3: Hopes and Fears

Teacher 31-M had visited the school to which he was to go during the last weeks while he was at teachers' college. He was told by the principal that he would be team teaching in a composite class in the middle school. In an interview after this visit, 31-M remarked:

*It'll be a challenge for me to work with people and to handle the kids – the kids are going to be quite tough. It will be a good experience. Flexibility, that's the key word.*

(31-M: Nov)

In the confidential report sent to the principal from the teachers' college, confirmation appeared of 31-M's appointment to the middle school:

*(31-M) should cope very satisfactorily in his first teaching post, which is in a standard two to four composite class. However, he has had no previous experience in a composite class, and he may well need help with organisation and management, especially initially.*

(E2/16A Report)

In another interview at the end of the college year, 31-M outlined in more detail the unit he thought he would be teaching in during 1979:

*There are three teachers in the unit. There is one male and a couple of females. They've a withdrawal room where they take about fifteen funny ones. They have them in there on a really structured programme. They have another withdrawal room – like a padded cell – and they have them in there when they're really going to blow. They get them in there and just tell them to stay there. So, that should be an experience. I'm looking forward to it.*

(31-M: Dec)

There was another first year teacher appointed to the same school, 34-F.



## The Day Before

On arriving in the staffroom on the morning of the 'teachers' day', a day just for the staff before the children arrived, the two first year teachers were greeted with this statement from the Senior Teacher of Junior Classes (STJC):

*... I don't really want to say too much to either of you. The situation since you visited here last year has slightly altered, but don't worry, you'll still be here.*

(31-43-STJC: Jan)

Several minutes later, the principal called the STJC and the two new teachers into his office. It was there that 31-M was told:

*It was in the last week of the school year that we really knew about Jenny, our Deputy Principal being transferred... This means we have to rearrange things, so that you (31-M) will now be working in the junior school with (the STJC), and you're very fortunate because I can't think of a better person to be supporting you and helping you this year.*

(31-34-P: Jan)

34-F, on the other hand, had her expectations confirmed:

*(34-F) you will be with Margaret. She is in unit four, and you will be working in there with a very small group of new entrant children. She's a very experienced teacher, and she will be directly responsible for you.*

(31-34-P: Jan)

After handing out class lists to each of the teachers, the principal remarked:

*The most important thing that I have to explain to you before you go to your meeting is that you are full members of staff and we will welcome your skills and experience and expertise and all the ideas that you've picked up at teachers' college. But I want you to remember too that there are some very experienced teachers here. These people will go out of their way to assist you. Don't think at any time you are on your own. I think that is the main thing to remember. This place only survives because of the nature of the school and because of the teamwork of the people here.*

(31-34-P: Jan)

At this stage, 31-M appeared a little disappointed with being told he would be teaching in the junior school:

31 M: Will I be teaching in the junior block for a whole year?

P: ... it all depends how things are going with numbers and so on ... I will think you will remain in the junior area anyway. Do you feel unhappy about that?

31-M: I suppose I won't mind the little ones. You can get used to them.

Upon returning to the staffroom, 31-M's reaction to the meeting was sought:

Interviewer: What is your reaction to being appointed to the juniors?

31-M: It's good, you know, just to be able to walk into another team.

Interviewer: It's a bit of a change isn't it?

31-M: It makes training college look a bit farcical. I spent the last two months at training college getting ready for the middle school (laughs). I'll be dragging out my notes from section (teaching experience) to remember what the juniors are like.

At this juncture, the principal called a brief informal staff meeting at which he welcomed and introduced the two first year teachers to the staff. Following this, the staff of the junior department, including the two new teachers,

met to discuss planning arrangements. Again, the neophytes — particularly 31-M — were given reassurances by the STJC:

*If at any stage you feel you can't take any more, or you know that if a child looks crossways at you, you are going to scream, well, just go. You can let me know quietly, and that would probably be best, because if anyone wants to know where you are we can make excuses. One of the quickest ways you'll drive yourself nuts is to keep things bottled up. If someone is irritating you in some way, let them know ... If you find things confusing, particularly you (31-M), I'll do my best to unscramble confusions. Again it's up to you. Let me know what you are confused about and I'll try and help you ...*

(31-34-STJC: Jan)

A few minutes later, the STJC introduced some banter into the conversation:

STJC: (31-M) what did you plan at the end of last year at college?

31-M: I didn't do anything. I refused to.

34-F: I didn't either.

STJC: All the traditions of a typical third year student. I'm proud of you (laughs) ... You could have done a hell of a lot of planning and it would have been lost anyway.

During the morning tea break, both first year teachers said they were impressed with the STJC:

34-F: She seems really nice. I met her when I came out last year ...

31-M: Nice friendly staff. They reckon all this revolves around (the STJC). She makes both the uppers and lowers mix in ... She's good.

Following morning tea, the STJC met with the two year-one teachers and introduced them to some of the school's policies:

*There are certain things we have to do, like keeping registers, and I'd like you to watch that it is done in the particular way (the principal) wants it ...*

*School officially starts at five to nine. We go through till twelve and then from one till three ...*

*There's very little in the way of after-school activity with the children. Most of them have either got day care centres to go to, or people to mind them. We have a fair number of working single parents or two working parents ...*

*With regard to your work plans, there will be a team plan which will be an overall plan. As well as that, there will be specific plans written by you. Don't go mad (laughs). Words are only words — it's the way you put those words into action that's important. Don't feel that you have to write down, for God's sake, every question that you're going to ask ...*

*I would like you to make an effort to get to know the kids very well, especially the children in your own home group ...*

(31-34-STJC: Jan)

She hastened to add a personal experience in this regard:

*When I used to teach children very similar to these in another school, I felt very lonely because when I came into the staffroom and said, "Guess what, old Peter recognises three," and everybody says, "Yeah, so what!" It's the most dreadful feeling. Here, if you walked in and said that, everyone would say, "Hooray." I think if you're doing a good job the people here will let you know.*

(31-34-STJC: Jan)

During the lunch break which followed, the principal spoke privately about his two new appointees. The extract



below is taken from the field notes of the day, and relates to this conversation:

*He mentioned how, in some schools, year ones are left to sink or swim. He emphasised that this would not happen in his school. This is the primary reason why 31-M was appointed to the junior section. Originally, the DP was assigned to look after 31-M, but with the transfer of the DP to another school, the principal did not think 31-M could handle the situation he was originally supposed to go into. The principal cited the case of how children sometimes 'bash' the teachers in the unit and shout all kinds of swear words at them. He also mentioned that last year he gained the impression that 31-M could be easily pushed around by the children. This being the case he felt that he needed guidance from a person like the STJC . . .*

(31-34-F/n: Jan)

After lunch, 34-F met with her senior teacher, while 31-M and his syndicate of teachers discussed the programme they were going to instigate for the children on the following day.

## The First Day

Both were there early on the next morning. During morning tea on that day, 31-M remarked of his pupils: 'They're small and thick'. And several minutes later:

*When I was on section (teaching experience) you could set the kids I had on research tasks or projects and they'd do them. They were great. We did this thing on Canada, doing filmstrips and that sort of stuff. They loved it. Kids made tapes and records. The kids I've got now – they've got no chance of doing that. I'll have to lower my expectations right down.*

(31-M: Jan)

Later in the day, he made further mention of the children in his home group:

*I got frustrated with their lack of work ability . . . I think they'll be all right. I'm just going to play it by ear and see how each day goes.*

(31-M: Jan)

34-F, on the other hand, said she experienced very little difficulty. That afternoon, some of the teachers, including the two first years, met at the local tavern. The field notes of the day relate what happened:

*The principal congratulated 31-M and 34-F on getting through their first day. He engaged in conversation with them for about twenty minutes telling them about his recent holiday. Both the first years seemed relaxed and talked freely with the other staff members. At about 4.15 pm, 31-M and 24-F began talking together of their experiences at the school thus far. Both said they thoroughly enjoyed the staff and the school. 31-M remarked that it was the best school he had ever been in and attributed this mainly to the principal and the STJC.*

(31-34-F/n: Jan)

## Reality Shock

Researchers have suggested that beginning teachers sometimes develop 'ideal' and 'unrealistic' images both of their roles as teachers and the schools they will be teaching in. Head lice came as a nasty shock to 32-F. Also a shock, but a pleasant one to 12-F, was the helpfulness of her principal. For 31-M his end-of-college visits to the

school led him to believe that he would be teaching in a composite class in the middle school. In reality, however, he was appointed to the junior school, where on the first teaching day he not only found the children to be 'small and thick', but his own expectations to be 'far too high'.

The reality shocks experienced by 34-F had occurred during her school visits at the end of the college year. Following an initial visit, and after speaking with the STJC, she remarked: 'I can't wait to get there.' However, during a second trip to the school she realised that the section of the school she would be teaching in was open plan. Previously, she had anticipated teaching in a single cell classroom. This lack of congruence, then, between her prior expectations and what she now experienced resulted in this reality shock.

## Coping Strategies and Reverse Reality Shock

Of interest are the strategies adopted by neophyte teachers to counter their reality shocks. After learning she would be teaching in open plan 34-F spoke to a girl who had been to the school for practice teaching. The reassurances she received from this person gave her encouragement and rebuilt her expectations to the point where she said: 'I'm looking forward to it'.

It is also interesting to note that she also experienced the 'shock' which can result from an unexpected agreement between expectations and the reality. In this instance, 34-F felt that the relationship with her senior teacher would be similar to what had occurred during practice teaching. This did eventuate because the senior teacher had ' . . . got all the activities ready, poems done and everything like that.' However, this shocked 34-F into realising that if she had gone into a single cell classroom, then 'there would have been nothing', and she would not have received 'all these ideas' nor 'learnt from the senior teacher'.

## The Influence of Power: The 'Real Interests'

The moves and strategies to counter the reality shock experienced by 31-M were instigated primarily by the principal and STJC.

It was the STJC who, acting in a facilitatory role, forewarned the two neophytes that, ' . . . the situation . . . (had) slightly altered' since they were last at the school. The change referred to by the STJC was that the DP had been transferred. It was this situation that the principal had seized upon to remove 31-M from the middle to the junior school. In reality, this rearrangement was made because of what the principal conceived 31-M's real interests to be:

*. . . the principal did not think 31-M could handle the situation he was originally supposed to go into . . . He also mentioned that last year he gained the impression that 31-M could be easily pushed around by the children. This being the case he felt he needed guidance from a person like the STJC . . .*

(31-34-F/n: Jan)



31-M believed it to be in his best interests to teach in the middle school. Both the principal and STJC had little difficulty in persuading 31-M to accept what they saw to be his real interests. Such acquiescence is evidenced in 31-M's statement that: 'I suppose I won't mind the little ones. You can get used to them.'

Although one can only speculate as to whether the principal would still have made this rearrangement if the DP had not been transferred, it is obvious that the strategy of concealing the 'real reasons' for the change from 31-M was an effective socialisatory move.

The reinforcement of the principal's and STJC's views of 31-M's real interests continued throughout the remainder of the first day. Indeed, statements from the principal such as '... you're very fortunate because I can't think of a better person (STJC) to be supporting you and helping you this year', and strategies adopted by the STJC (e.g., reminiscing about her life as a year one teacher and recalling her past experiences with past beginning teachers) embodies this to such an extent that 31-M was to remark that: '... it was the best school he had ever been in and attributed this mainly to the principal and STJC.'

## Conclusion

Besides shedding light on some of the human realities faced by first year teachers, at least two practical applications can be drawn from the socialisatory episodes rererred to in this paper:

(a) Induction can be a worthwhile process with the presence of a qualified co-operating teacher. In the case of the two beginning teachers 31-M and 34-F, this person was the STJC. She judged that these teachers needed to be made aware of information such as: when the school officially starts and finishes; the school's policy on keeping registers; the type of children the school caters for and the backgrounds of the parents; lesson planning arrangements and the practicalities of planning; aspects of her philosophy (e.g., about children).

(b) Detecting and predicting reality shock and then countering it with various strategies (e.g., support and encouragement) can be an effective induction manoeuvre on the part of principals and senior teachers.

For Robinson Crusoe the severity and harshness of loneliness was the epitome of his early life on that isolated island. The presence of Friday, however, added a new dimension to Defoe's hero's island existence. In the same way, the help, guidance and 'craft knowledge' provided by an STJC and principal — and other teachers who befriend neophytes — can counter the loneliness and isolation felt by some beginning teachers at their first teaching post.

## Notes:

### Early Research on First Year Teachers

A fuller description of Willard Waller's work, particularly his research on the first year teacher, can be found in the following publication:

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